"REESTABLISHING THE LINK"

THE NEED FOR TRANSPORTATION/LAND USE PLANNING TO SUPPORT INCREASED PUBLIC TRANSIT USE IN SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA

A DISCUSSION PAPER

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INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE

The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991, provides the current federal funding and policy guidance for highway, transit, freight, pedestrian and bicycle planning in the United States. A key aspect of ISTEA is the policy goal of linking transportation and land use planning at the state, area and local levels. The intent of this linkage is to promote better transportation plans and projects through thorough consideration of land use, public facility, environmental quality and community development needs and objectives, including open public involvement throughout the planning process. This approach is in contrast with much of the past land use and transportation planning, which was often done in a vacuum.

In this regard, through the cooperative forum provided by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission and various task forces established by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) has advocated the need for effective transportation/land use planning at all governmental levels. SEPTA believes the benefits of coordinated transportation and land use planning will yield more livable and sustainable communities, while at the same time, enhancing the prospects for public transit services and facilities as alternatives to total reliance on the private automobile for regional mobility.

This discussion paper is intended to provide the reader with background on the state of land use planning in the region and the Commonwealth, while also reviewing the problems that have resulted from "business as usual" and the opportunities that "reestablishing the link" can create for the future. Reactions and questions about the paper are welcome; comments can be sent to SEPTA, Long Range Planning Department, 1234 Market Street, 9th Floor, Philadelphia, PA 19107.

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I. PERSPECTIVES ON GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Growth and development .... Three words that represent different things to different people. It depends on your point of view:

Chamber of Commerce: To the local chamber of commerce growth and development means prosperity, jobs, profits and good times.

Developer: To the developer growth and development also mean good times, the ability to develop land, to provide residential, commercial or industrial buildings for prospective owners or tenants and the opportunity to share in the economic advancement of their community, county and region.

Elected Official: To the elected official growth and development can have two sides: one quite positive and one potentially negative. From the positive perspective, elected officials want to promote their community to generate tax revenues and to encourage jobs and prosperity. In this regard they share the viewpoints of the chamber of commerce and the developer. On the other hand, the elected official must also be mindful of the concerns of their constituents and the overall quality of life in their community. They have to **see it both ways**, because they need to be concerned about both the **short term** and the **long term** consequences of growth and development.

They have to ask tough questions about **what** development is occurring, **where** it is located, **how** it will be serviced, **what** access it will have and **what** the impact will be on both nearby neighborhoods and on the community as a whole.

Local Residents: To local residents, growth and development usually has a negative connotation -- not because they are against the benefits that flow from development, but because they are concerned about the real or perceived negative consequences for themselves, their neighborhood or the community. Often, as a reflection of human nature, the degree of opposition to growth and development varies directly with the proximity of a proposed project to a person's home or neighborhood. Hence, the infamous NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome and LULU's (Locally Unwanted Land Uses). Also, opposition to growth often grows dramatically among the most recent arrivals in a community.

Given these different perspectives, how does anything get accomplished? One way, at least in southeastern Pennsylvania, is through the local government planning process. Through Act 247, "The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code," local governments are empowered to prepare and enact comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances and subdivison and land development ordinances to plan for and regulate where, what, and how growth and development will occur in their community.

II. PLANNING IN PENNSYLVANIA

Planning in Pennsylvania is locally-oriented for two reasons: First, every square inch of the Commonwealth's land area is under local jurisdiction-- there are no unincorporated places and counties are "umbrella" governments which include municipalities within their boundaries.

Second, the Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) gives both municipalities and counties the right to prepare and enact comprehensive plans, zoning ordinances and subdivision and land development ordinances. However, the intent is clearly for municipalities to have control over their destiny; municipal enactment of a zoning ordinance or subdivision and land development ordinance automatically repeals a similar county ordinance that applies to that community.

Unfortunately, the record of planning and ordinance adoption across the Commonwealth is **not** good. Only about 60 percent of Pennsylvania's 2,573 townships, boroughs and cities have prepared comprehensive plans or enacted zoning ordinances and only 50 percent have a planning commission. Several of Pennsylvania's 67 counties have still not prepared their first comprehensive plan, and a requirement that they do so was not added to the MPC until 1988.

The record of planning and ordinance enactment in southeastern Pennsylvania's five counties and 239 municipalities is the highest in the Commonwealth. All five counties (the City of Philadelphia is both a city and a county) have adopted comprehensive plans and, with few exceptions, all of the local governments have a comprehensive plan, zoning ordinance and subdivision and land development ordinance.

This high level of plan and ordinance attainment reflects a tradition of planning in the area (starting with William Penn's plan for Philadelphia); the pressures of growth and development (more than 30 percent of the Commonwealth's population lives in southeastern Pennsylvania); and the active promotion of planning and plan implementation by the City of Philadelphia and the Bucks, Chester, Delaware and Montgomery County planning commissions.

Despite southeastern Pennsylvania's excellent record in enacting the basic planning tools, the current state of planning and decision-making in the region is very fragmented. The outcome is a land use control system that is bottom-up and subject to the whims of multiple, local jurisdictions for day-to-day decisions on what, where and how growth and development will take place in the Philadelphia region. Some do it very well, some do it fairly well and others do it poorly. It depends on your perspective, **but** it also depends on the visual, physical, social and environmental impacts which flow from new development.

III. CONSEQUENCES OF GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Fragmented decision-making and inadequate planning tools are contributing causes of the problems of growth and development. The outcome for communities and the quality of life of local residents is sprawl, congestion, air pollution, infrastructure demands and a lack of identity. Each of these problems can be summarized as follows:

A. **Sprawl:** A sprawling development pattern epitomizes the post-World War II suburbanization of America, but this has not always been the case.

Earlier suburbs, particularly those built around the street car systems of the 1920's and 1930's, reflected a more compact development pattern which facilitated use of public transit and walking to reach neighborhood-oriented services and facilities. With the increasing use of the automobile for personal transport and the population growth boom which occurred in the 1950's and 1960's, the focus of development decentralized away from central cities and toward the small towns and farming communities scattered across the countryside. The development pattern which resulted **broke the link** between transportation and land use which had developed historically. Instead, **highway access** was taken for granted and land use decisions were (and are) often made without regard for the effects on highway congestion, public transit, the loss of pedestrian scale or the impacts on adjacent communities.

Scattered, formless, leap-frog development, which clogs the frontage of local roads and produces a sea of unsightly signs and repetitive curb cuts for local access, is a result of suburban sprawl and strip development.

More critically, another by-product of sprawl is the loss of open space, productive farmlands, scenic vistas and any sense of being a community. A June 1990 study of farmland preservation programs, prepared by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, found that southeastern Pennsylvania lost almost 74,500 acres (18%) of farmland between 1982 and 1987, lowering the region's farmland acreage from 413,400 to 338,900 acres. Bucks County lost 24 percent of its farmland, Chester County 14 percent, Delaware County 12 percent and Montgomery County 23 percent.

In response, planners promoted enhanced subdivision design with curvalinear streets with lots surrounded by extensive landscaping and reverse frontage lots which avoid curb cuts on local roads. More appropriately, planners have promoted cluster development, in many forms, which is intended to maintain current density but yields smaller lots, closer together, with the land saved by not developing to the traditional lot size pooled into a permanent open space area. However, these subdivision and site planning techniques have met with mixed success and infrequent application by local officials skeptical of anything new or different from the community norm.

Even less successful have been efforts to increase the density of development or to introduce a variety of dwelling types, lot sizes and mixed use developments in communities. The predominant housing style is the single-family detached dwelling, at low densities of one dwelling unit or less per acre with occasional densities as high as two units per acre (1/2 acre lots). Southeastern Pennsylvania, in particular, reflects a conservative market preference for large lot, single-family subdivisions with great resistance to attached housing or smaller lot sizes. Without the impetus of a string of Pennsylvania Supreme Court and Commonwealth Court cases during the 1970's and 1980's, the landscape of suburban Pennsylvania would have even fewer apartments and townhouses than it has at present.

B. **Congestion:** A highway-dominant and auto-dependent development pattern yields more trips, the need for more automobiles and more vehicle miles of travel. Unrestricted curb cuts for access and the need to be located on major arteries, overloads existing highways and creates new demands for road widening, bypasses and expressways. It is a vicious cycle!

The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission has well documented the increasing congestion on southeastern Pennsylvania's highway network. Their studies have shown traffic volume growth of six percent annually on major regional arterials; double the "normal" growth rate of three percent for other major metropolitan regions. Some expressways, like I-476 (the Blue Route) and the Route 422 Expressway from King of Prussia to Pottstown, are experiencing traffic volume growth well in excess of 10 percent per year.

In addition, the region's auto ownership, vehicle trips and vehicle miles of travel are forecasted to grow at **double to triple** the rate of population, employment and households over the next 25 years. These growth trends point out the **severe** congestion problems facing the region and the consequences of a decentralized, sprawling and low density development pattern which necessitates a vehicle trip (or two or three) for every daily need (work, shopping, school, recreation).

C. **Air Pollution:** Southeastern Pennsylvania is part of a larger region which has been designated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a severe non-attainment area for ozone and a moderate non-attainment area for carbon monoxide. Approximately 60 percent of these pollutants are attributable to mobile sources (vehicle exhausts). Thus, additional traffic growth not only is frustrating to commuters but poisons the air we breath.

Failure to deal with the region's non-attainment status could result in future sanctions on highway funding or extra burdens on industries in Pennsylvania. Given the present

backlog of highway maintenance and rehabilitation needs, this would not be a wise course of action for the Commonwealth. Serious planning and preparation of strategies to lower vehicle miles of travel will be needed to respond to EPA and the federally-mandated deadlines in the Clean Air Act. Public transit and related measures to increase vehicle occupancy and to reduce vehicle trips will be key components in achieving an air quality solution.

D. **Infrastructure Demands:** The story of SEPTA's need to rebuild its deteriorated facilities, stations and crumbling bridges has been told many times. The message is serious and the needs are great. Municipalities faced with new growth and development, however, often face the opposite situation. Rather than focusing attention on rebuilding what they have, these communities find that they are playing catch-up with increasing pressures for new or expanded facilities, particularly roads, sewer and water facilities and storm drainage. Sometimes, developers or business interests will help to defray the cost of such improvements, particularly if it benefits their project. However, the available funding for infrastructure expansion is as limited, if not more so, than the funds for replacement and rehabilitation.

Communities confronted with rapid growth often face the need to expensively retrofit existing roads and other facilities to cope with new development. Seldom do such communities systematically plan ahead for new infrastructure systems in accordance with an overall plan or capital program.

The dispersed, low density nature of most suburban development adds to the total bill for new or expanded infrastructure systems and also results in wasteful duplication of facilities. Concentration rather than dispersal, with higher densities and intensities of use, are ways to reduce the overall cost and relate to the need for more compact development patterns.

E. **Lack of Identity:** It can definitely be said about some suburban areas that "there is no there there." With the premise of auto-oriented development patterns and low density sprawl, these communities lack the sense of place and community focal points that can transform sprawl into a recognizable center. The adopted New Jersey State Plan is entitled "Communities of Place" to reflect the goals of enhancing and preserving existing towns and villages, while curtailing further wasteful sprawl.

Pennsylvania also has towns and villages which stand out in a landscape that is dominated by auto-oriented suburbs. They stand out because they reflect a sense of orientation, a mix of uses, a pedestrian, walk-to scale and, sometimes, a strong role for public transit within their boundaries. They also provide and reinforce a strong social effect in the lives of their residents. Narberth Borough and Ambler Borough, both in Montgomery County, are prime examples of "communities of place" that should be preserved and supported rather than overwhelmed or bypassed by the tide of new suburban development.

IV. A FUTURE BETTER THAN THE PAST

The key to a regional growth and development pattern that avoids sprawl, reduces congestion, lowers air pollution, conserves infrastructure and creates a sense of community identity is to **reestablish the link between transportation and land use.** From SEPTA's perspective, this means a strong role for public transportation as a means to access work,

shopping, education and recreation trips. It does **not** mean the elimination of the automobile or the diminution of its important role in everyone's lifestyle. It **does** mean, however, planning and working **for** public transportation, including taking those actions which can make public transportation work better in a community.

A. **More Compact Development:** First and foremost, communities have to **consciously plan for public transportation by focusing growth and development around and within town centers or villages.** By concentrating development, rather than spreading it across the countryside, a concentrated origin and destination pattern can be created. Transit works best in this setting; transit is not cost effective if origins and destinations are widely dispersed across an area. As noted above, this pattern of development will not only support opportunities for public transit, but will also provide a focal point, like a town center, for a community. The resultant sense of place will improve the overall quality of life for local residents and enhance the overall physical qualities of design and form. In addition, a study by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia found that houses located close to SEPTA's Regional Rail stations had a six percent higher value than similar houses located elsewhere in the same community.

B. **Higher Densities:** In addition to more compact development, communities developed at higher densities also serve to support public transit use. While densities in excess of ten dwelling units per acre are optimal, in a suburban setting, it would help if some areas of a community could at least be developed at medium densities of five to eight dwelling units per acre.

This range corresponds to the density of much of the attached housing (usually townhouses) occurring in the Philadelphia suburbs. These uses, along with garden apartments or mid-rise structures at higher densities (ten dwelling units per acre or more) should be located within and around a community's designated town center. This would avoid the random spread of multi-family development throughout a community, while reinforcing a compact development pattern. From a public transit perspective, widely scattered, rather than concentrated, areas of higher density, are less supportive of increased transit ridership.

C. **Mixed Uses**: An issue related to higher densities and more compact development is mixed uses. Rather than encouraging more auto trips for shopping, work, education and recreation needs, communities need to think about establishing areas for a mix of uses. If job sites, stores, restaurants, daycare facilities, schools and parks are located in proximity to each other, multiple vehicle trips can be reduced; especially the kind that occur when a driver goes from one driveway to another, along the same highway, to fulfill shopping needs. The shopping center and the industrial/office park are better designed, from a transit perspective, than the typical strip development. In particular, strip development with frequent curb cuts, adds to both traffic hazards and congestion.

Zoning ordinances can be an obstacle to the accomplishment of mixed uses, because they tend to be founded on the premise of separating rather than intermingling different uses. However, successful mixed use developments, ranging from planned residential developments to multi-use, non-residential structures or concentrations of residential and non-residential uses, have often been guided by mixed use zoning districts. Working in partnership with their county planning commission for technical advice, such districts can be prepared for any community.

Having established a more compact development pattern with higher densities and a mix of uses, preferably in a town center area, communities can be well positioned to encourage opportunities for public transportation. However, there are two more aspects which must be addressed if the link between transportation and land use is to be cemented.

D. **Transit-Friendly Design**: An often overlooked aspect of the transportation/land use linkage issue is the need to pursue the concept at the **site planning scale** as well as the **community planning scale.** More compact development, higher densities and mixed uses reflect the community planning scale and they can be addressed most readily through the comprehensive plan (policy) and the zoning ordinance (policy implementation).

Transit-friendly design, while it involves aspects of community planning scale, really focuses on the site plan level. Site planning is addressed through the subdivision and land development ordinance, which prescribes **how** land will be developed, including necessary roads, facilities and utilities.

The goal of transit-friendly design is to ensure that the streets, sidewalks, building entrances and overall layout of a proposed development are oriented not just to the automobile user but also to public transportation and the transit user. Some examples are as follows:

- Streets need to be designed to avoid sharply angled curves which force a bus to move into the opposing lane to make the turn.

- Building entrances and sidewalks need to be oriented toward and near the street on which public transit operates, rather than being separated by more than a quarter mile of parked automobiles.
- Bus stops and shelters need to be located so as to blend with traffic and pedestrian flow rather than adding to congestion.
- Where rail transit is involved, the connections to stations have to be clearly marked and be as direct and well lighted as possible.
- Whenever possible, particularly in a more urban setting or one involving the development of a major mixed use or single use project adjacent to a station, opportunities to combine and integrate the station, parking and related functions with the proposed development should be explored.

E. **Transportation Centers:** A key concept which **combines** the community planning and site planning scale is the transportation center. Transportation centers respond to the need for compact development and create opportunities for mixed uses and higher densities. In essence, they can become a focal point for joint growth and development, with particular emphasis on a quarter mile radius around the station area (comfortable walking distance).

Transportation centers also respond to the site planning scale by encouraging a pedestrian orientation and easy transfers from cars to public transit or between different types of public transit. A good example is the Norristown Transportation Center, where the Route 100 Norristown High Speed Line, the R6 Regional Rail Line, various Frontier Division bus routes, taxi service and compact parking areas **come together by design not by happenstance.**

Transfers between modes are facilitated; traffic flow in the Borough has been improved by removing parked buses from local streets; and opportunities for more intensive development close to the Transportation Center have been created. A 100,000 square foot office building was developed just west of the Center due to its proximity to public transportation.

Transportation Centers are a key concept in SEPTA's 20-Year Long Range Plan, **Vision of the Future,** and are part of the 10-Year Action Plan and 12-Year Capital Program. SEPTA, however, cannot do it alone. Active involvement and participation from the respective city and county planning commissions and local municipalities is essential to plan for additional centers and to ensure that they are developed in harmony with their surroundings. The support and involvement of the private sector, particularly prospective developers, is also essential to add the critical development market and feasibility ingredients to the overall equation.

V. WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

SEPTA hopes that communities in southeastern Pennsylvania will examine their plans and ordinances to incorporate the public transportation-oriented concepts discussed above. Resources and technical assistance are available from a variety of sources, including SEPTA staff. An essential first step is the **policy commitment** to implement changes from the status quo and a willingness to listen to and try new ideas. SEPTA is confident that the end result of this dialogue can prove beneficial for a community's overall development pattern and the quality of life of its residents, while also providing additional support for the future of public transportation in the region. **Reestablishing the link is a goal which can provide benefits for all, regardless of their perspective on growth and development.**